

Speaking through Association

By Oya Tunaboğlu (Turkey)

Of the four language skills, speaking is generally considered the most difficult to learn. Many students have the misconception that writing in the target language is superior to speaking. Nevertheless, it is only our tongue that builds a communication bridge between the listener and the speaker.

There are many reasons why students tend to be silent listeners rather than active learners in the oral-English class. The most important reason is the psychological pressure of making mistakes in the presence of their classmates; the second reason is their poor vocabulary.

A Useful Technique

I shall describe a simple technique for developing and using vocabulary that I call “Speaking through Association.” This technique can be employed in practically any speaking class. This is how it is done: The teacher writes a list of useful words and phrases and asks the students to think about them. The words should be chosen according to their general usefulness and productivity. They should be words that can be related to the students’ life experience.

After giving the students a few minutes to think about the words, the teacher should have them choose one word from the list and try to recall or figure out its meaning. One student should try to explain what he thinks the word means. When the first student finishes his explanation, the teacher asks others whether they can expand on the information already given, drawing on their experiences and knowledge of their environment.

An Example

This technique can be illustrated with a simple example. Take the list:

traffic lights
central heating
mailing system
magazine
clearance sale(s)

From the above list, a student chooses the word *magazine* and tries to explain its meaning. After a few minutes of preparation to collect his knowledge about the word, he begins his explanation as follows: “A magazine is a kind of newspaper we read.”

The teacher then asks the other students to expand on the explanation by adding more meaningful words/sentences. Another student may say: “A magazine is a periodical or publication better than a newspaper, which is issued regularly.”

A third student, picking up on the word *regularly*, adds: “A magazine is a periodical which contains articles and pictures and is issued weekly or monthly.”

The difference between the first and last explanations shows that the students may have more or less knowledge of the word according to their daily-life experiences.

After learning the basic meaning of the word, the students want to know whether it has any more meanings. This motivates them to turn to a dictionary-a task that they usually consider burdensome and arduous.

Drawing from Life Experience

Here is an example, using a word from the above list, that shows the importance of using everyday life experience in language learning:

The vocabulary item *traffic lights* may be selected, which represents something in the students’ everyday life. The teacher asks a student to explain the phrase, drawing on his real-life experience. He will at least know the functions of the three colours, and he should also be able to find appropriate words (verb, noun, adjective, etc.) related to a traffic light’s form and function. For instance, he should know and use the verb to turn to when speaking about the traffic lights. So, drawing on his life experience and related words, he can say:

	<i>related word</i>	<i>life experience</i>
When it	turns to green	...safe
When it	turns to yellow	...caution
When it	turns to red	...stop

One student may explain the meaning of the three colours, another student may enlarge on the explanation, speaking about the function of the light, the importance of this system, and so forth.

Similarly, if the student selects the item heating system, he should be able to use related words such as *main*, *tank*, *pipe*, *to boil*, etc., in his explanation.

Advantages of This Technique

To sum up:

1. This technique requires the students to bring their daily-life experiences into the classroom, making the speaking practice more entertaining.
2. Contradictory explanations given by different students motivate them to find out which one is correct (one explains that a magazine is a newspaper, another disputes this explanation and says

it is a periodical rather than a newspaper). Therefore they are motivated to use a dictionary, which further enriches their vocabulary.

3. It helps them to learn beyond and independently of their textbooks.

4. It fosters a unique cooperation among the students. When a student finishes his explanation to the best of his knowledge of both the L2 and his life experience, another, expanding on the explanation, adds more associated words and completes the explanation.